

Art, Architecture & Art History
Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Epilogue: On philosophers and artists

J.L. Benson
University of Massachusetts Amherst

EPILOGUE

ON PHILOSOPHERS AND ARTISTS

The very conception of polarities, so basic to Greek experience and thought, suggests that individuals could have quite opposite viewpoints and still be addressing the same root problem. The corollary of this is that individuals of creative talent in various fields shared in a common pursuit—and certainly much more homogeneously than would be conceivable in our fragmented times. Therefore, the tale in this book is of artists who explored—nonverbally—scientific theorems and, by mention at least, of philosophers who explored scientific theorems *verbally* with more or less poetic flare. The parallelism of their efforts, presumably undertaken with little or only general awareness of each other by the two groups, is more striking than might be suspected. I shall turn, therefore, to a post factum review of the evolutionary aspect of the Four Elements theory (see Chapter IV, *Setting the Protohellenistic Period*, The larger problem, paragraphs 4–5).

The intentions of artists in this light can obviously be studied much earlier than those of philosophers (although the writings of Homer and Hesiod¹ are sometimes viewed as a substitute). Let us begin with Thales, whose *floruit* in the earlier part of the 6th century puts him squarely in the developed Archaic period. The fact that he and his successors to the end of the third quarter of the century can be called physical philosophers, interested almost exclusively in the macrocosmos, recalls that the work of their sculptor-contemporaries proved also to be best analyzable from this standpoint (see Appendix A). It is quite appropriate, then, to note the following convergences:

- a. the sculptors of the kouros form were deeply involved in grasping what I have called aqueous man (water-man). Thales saw the cosmos and everything in it as composed of water.
- b. the criterion of artistic composition in the Archaic period was unyielding, imperturbable balance of stasis (in the horizontal plane). Not only is this the ultimate

characteristic of water, but it shares with the apeiron theory of Anaximander, slightly younger contemporary of Thales, the quality of fixity and timelessness in the infinitely recurring, exact reproduction of the world-state out of the unchanging apeiron.

- c. the discovery of the kouroi masters from about 530/525 that the mastery of corporeal details and even slight hints of sentience (the smile) were not enough to replicate human consciousness, but that breathing would have to be indicated, has to be seen alongside the slightly earlier theorem of Anaximenes, who died ca. 528–525, that air is the monistic principle of all reality. It was, as we have determined, the gradual transformation of water-man into aerated mineral-man, which took place in the fifty years following 530/525 (the Protoclassical period), that toppled the Archaic aesthetic and opened the way for the completely differently constituted Classical period.

If we now turn our attention to the two great philosophers who flourished in exactly the critical Protoclassical years, we find the emergence of a subjectivism that spelled the death sentence for one-sided macrocosmic speculation as a norm.

Although Herakleitos introduced fire as the underlying key to reality, fire happens to be the least comprehensible of the elements as a physical entity and was also equated by him with another essence, the Logos, which accentuates the supraphysical (psychic) dimension of fire as one of the four elements. Henceforth philosophy could be carried on at both the macrocosmic *and* microcosmic level. This corresponds not only to the infusion of shallow breathing (emitting warmth) into kouroi figures but more particularly to the deconstruction of Archaic tectonic structure from within by psychic forces that pressed toward dynamic ponderation. Perhaps even more telling is the fusion, at this point, of the microcosmic stream of color development in painting with the macrocosmic stream of form development in sculpture: the relation of breathing (air) to red and fire (*nous*) to white becomes palpable in artistic practice.

That the new flexibility of outlook demanded (literally and imperiously, it would seem) by Herakleitos took so long to achieve is understandable not only on the basis of the unheard-of dimensions of change from traditional ways involved, but by the inevitable polaric reaction, represented in this case by the philosophy of Parmenides. By digging in, so to speak, with an equally imperious doctrine of unchangeable Being as the only true value, he established a holding position that could serve as a criterion and steady force through the post-Archaic era. Yet even he could not be totally unmoved by the “winds of change” and he had to let the phenomenal world stand as an inferior, inexplicable shadow-side of human experience, quite in keeping with the immanent Greek concept of the *krasis* of light and darkness—in both philosophy and color theory.

In a less clear and definable sense, the shadow of Pythagoras also falls on the Protoclassical and earlier Classical world. Among other things his ideas on color, or those of his immediate successors, seem inextricably involved in the matter of the colors of the four elements, affecting in some not quite definable way the views of Empedocles (*Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements*).

If, nonetheless, the religious and esoteric side of that philosopher seems more attuned to Pythagoreanism, the philosophical, natural-scientific side of Empedocles is

closely linked with Parmenides and in a certain sense expands and transforms the latter's work into the dynamically balanced theory of the four elements—which, as I believe, is the foundation of the High Classical outlook. What has not been sufficiently emphasized in my study is the totally rhythmical, that is, periodical, cyclical aspect of the Four Elements theory as philosophy: the “Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen” (unceasing reversion to the same state) of Anaximander raised to a new level of consciousness. This aspect has been unpalatable to some critics both ancient and modern by reason of its supposed purposelessness.

To deal with this in context, one is obliged to ask whether High Classical thought (and achievement as such—sculpture, architecture, drama, etc.) really has a purpose? It is a momentary phenomenon, a perfect embodiment of self-levitating balance that would deny itself if it went definitively to the right or left, up or down, forward or backward.² And as such it *is* actually a miraculous phenomenon (despite the emotions the use of this word in relation to Classical Art now arouses), sustained by no self-conscious effort (if one trusts the effect it makes). Successors could have had no choice but to tip this balance in whatever way, thus destroying its perfect message—just as Plato and Aristotle actually did. Even conscientious imitators down the ages could not conceal the shadow of this dilemma, however much they may have provided another momentary balance and elegance to their time and setting.

Thus the High Classical Four Elements theory, with concomitant contrapposto and colors, epitomizes the pre-Christian world's experience of cyclical time: ascending, circling, descending, circling, again ascending and circling, evermore: its power to attract and to repel seems to reflect the Love and Hate which Empedocles took in to activate his cycles.